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FILE ONLY

Soviet military might ¹⁴⁸invades defense debate

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan's drive for another major increase in defense spending — the latest stage of his \$3 trillion, 10-year military buildup — has encountered unexpected first-round obstacles on Capitol Hill.

For the first time since Reagan launched his buildup in 1981, several senators and representatives have begun raising questions about whether the Soviet military buildup has begun to slow — reducing the necessity for continued American hikes.

Others have been asking whether defense spending by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization allies doesn't, in fact, outstrip defense spending by the Soviet-dominated Warsaw Pact.

If the allies are already spending more than the Warsaw Pact, asked respected defense expert Sen. Sam Nunn, D-Ga., why should the United States have to continue building at higher rates?

THOSE QUESTIONS — confronted by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger in budget hearings this week — seemed to fly in the face of repeated assertions by Weinberger and by Reagan that the major reason for higher U.S. defense spending is to respond to the Soviet buildup.

The administration has requested an 8.4 percent real increase for 1986, after allowing for inflation.

And the eventual fate of Reagan's entire budget, which would increase defense spending while sharply reducing many social programs, probably will rest on how well Weinberger's arguments can be sustained.

All early evidence indicates that both Reagan and Weinberger are in trouble — but it's hard to measure how deeply.

A major reason for the administration's trouble lies in relatively new questions about the Soviet military buildup and studies comparing NATO and Warsaw Pact defense spending.

TWO DOCUMENTS that have received little attention in the nation's news media are responsible for some of the tough new questions.

One is an article by Richard Kaufman, a defense specialist on the staff of Congress' Joint Economic Committee. It cites CIA reports that the much-advertised Soviet military buildup began to slow down around 1976 — but that the slowdown wasn't discovered by the CIA until 1983.

It has long been known that the Soviet buildup began around 1963 after Soviet embarrassment about the 1962 Cuban missile crisis and continued for years at the annual rate of about three percent, after adjusting for inflation.

In a little-noticed article in the magazine *Soviet Economy*, published by the Brookings Institution, Kaufman wrote that the CIA had expected the Soviet buildup to continue at the three percent rate. But, he wrote, those estimates were revised in 1983, and the CIA now believes that growth has been "slowed to slightly less than two percent" since 1976.

In other words, the CIA estimates suggest that while the Reagan administration has been building up U.S. defenses since 1981, Soviet defense growth has been slowing down.

THE OTHER document that has attracted wide attention on Capitol Hill is a House Budget Committee study produced last year, comparing military spending by NATO, the Warsaw Pact and China.

According to the study, NATO spending in 1982 — the last year for which complete figures are available — came to \$256 billion, compared with

\$202 billion by the Warsaw Pact and \$57 billion by China.

The same study put NATO military manpower at 5.8 million, compared with 4.8 million each in the Warsaw Pact nations and China.

A House Armed Services Committee staff expert said that NATO spending is believed to be about 30 percent higher than the Warsaw Pact's this year.

PUBLICATION of those studies has been accompanied by a change in the leadership of the House Armed Services Committee, one of the most powerful committees in Congress because it holds the purse strings on defense.

Rep. Les Aspin, D-Wis., an aggressive 46-year-old who once worked at the Pentagon and who has made a career of defense issues in Congress, has taken over as the committee's chairman from an ailing Rep. Melvin Price, D-Ill., and already has made clear that he's starting a new ball game.

"From now on," said one Aspin aide, "the Pentagon is going to have to answer for how it's spending the money. Aspin wants to know why a lot of things have to be done and what we're

getting for our dollars."

Aspin indicated in hearings that he expects to explore in detail the question of the comparative U.S.-Soviet military buildup as the administration's defense budget is considered.

Finally, there is widespread doubt among both Republicans and Democrats that continued major increases in defense spending can be sustained in light of the budget deficit crisis.

That skepticism has come even from such defense stalwarts as Sens. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., the new chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and John Stennis, D-Miss., its revered former chairman.

They and others are making the point that the health of the nation's economy may be just as important to the national security as the size of the defense budget.